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ABSTRACT

It is not uncommon for beginning teachers in Queensland (Australia) to be assigned their first teaching placement in a rural area. Many of these teachers stay there for the minimum time that they must, then seek to relocate to a coastal city. The literature and interviews with beginning rural teachers suggest that those who view the experience positively have their roots in the community, or a similar one, and those with negative views experience a multifaceted sense of isolation-- physical, interpersonal, cultural, intellectual, and personal. These considerations are bound together in notions of identity and community. Identity is a social phenomenon bound up in the people and community with whom a person feels comfortable; but it also tends to be associated with the physical place occupied by the community. Applying this to beginning teachers, several aspects of identity emerge: personal and social identity, focusing particularly upon the immediate family group and the place where one grew up; professional identity, focusing on the preservice community, university, and current school placement; and desired future social and professional identity. If the teaching situation provides a mismatch with an aspect of the teacher's identity, then a sense of isolation is felt. Although isolation may be real in a geographic sense, identity mismatch amplifies perceived isolation and the urge to move to a place that more closely matches the teacher's identity. (TD)

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# PUTTING RURALITY ON THE AGENDA: Beginning Teachers in Rural Schools

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A paper presented as part of the symposium on *Putting Rurality on the Agenda* chaired by Marie Brennan at the Australian Association for Research in Education annual conference, Adelaide, 29 November - 4 December, 1998.

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# PUTTING RURALITY ON THE AGENDA
## Beginning Teachers in Rural Schools

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It is not uncommon for beginning teachers in Queensland to be assigned their first teaching placement in a rural area. There are indications that many of these teachers stay there for the minimum time that they have to, and then seek to relocate to a coastal city, usually in the south-east corner of the state. This raises questions as to how the rural experience is felt and interpreted by beginning teachers, especially within the framework of their induction years. My contribution to this discussion of rurality therefore focuses on beginning teachers. It draws from some of the literature, over twenty years of experience with students and teachers in rural areas, and a research project which focused on beginning teachers and their science teaching. This paper is consequently structured as a set of ideas which may stimulate further discussion.

It seems that many teachers view rural service as either an imposition to be endured, or as an opportunity to live in a desirable location and community (Boylan & McSwan, 1998). Beginning teachers too seem to view it in similar ways, though over time such perceptions may change. Those who view the experience positively tend to do so because of their roots in the community (or a similar one), and those who do not tend to do so because of perceived isolation, which has a number of facets. Boylan and McSwan highlight some of the stereotypes associated with rural teaching assignments, and point to research, including their own, which explores the clearly identifiable exceptions to the stereotypes.

If this is so, then a key aspect of constructing a theoretical understanding of rurality for teachers is their perceptions of the teaching-in-a-rural-community experience, their past experiences, and the local community views of their rural experience. I would postulate that these considerations are all bound together in the notions of identity and community (such as explored, for instance, by Stevenson, 1998).

**Rurality**

Before delving into that thought further, what is meant by "rurality" needs to be clarified. I suggest that in Queensland, there are three rather than the two categories of

rurality suggested by Boylan & McSwan (1998). They suggested "remote" and "provincial" categories, the latter being those within 100 km of a large centre. I would suggest a third category of "mining town." This category is characterised by more than remoteness: there is also a pervasive attitude of temporary residency. This is seen in behaviour such as leaving town for a coastal city at every opportunity, and identifying themselves in terms of where they came from and how long they intend to stay. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalisation; some residents are long term and have settled permanently into the town in a similar way to the long-staying teachers studied by Boylan and McSwan.

A memorable example of "mass evacuation" to the coast is expressed in the words of a beginning teacher newly appointed to a mining town:

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| Interviewer: | So you'd spend a few weekends here? |
| Teacher: | None. |
| Interviewer: | None? |
| Teacher: | I've spent four in the year. |
| Interviewer: | So where do you go? |
| Teacher: | To [coastal city]. |
| Interviewer: | What's that three or four hours [driving time]? |
| Teacher: | Three hours, yeah I head off at 2.30 Friday afternoons. There's nothing here to do on the weekends [in the author's experience, the driving time would be closer to four hours]. |
| Interviewer: | What do most other teachers do? |
| Teacher: | [My friend] goes every weekend. I don't know what the rest of them do - I've never been here to see it. A lot of them go into [a nearby larger regional town] I assume. A lot of people here head away on the weekends. See the other thing I've noticed at this school: you find parents don't mind taking their kids out of class. Like they will go on holidays two weeks early because [of] the mine [work requirements]. They may not necessarily be able to get their holiday on school holidays. I had a girl who was out of school for three weeks before June because that's when they had their holidays so they went. Another guy came up from New South Wales and he went back down for two weeks and he is a kid that struggles, so he needs to spend as much time in school as possible and they're taking him out for two weeks because New South Wales holidays are two weeks after ours. So they don't seem to mind. They'll head off if dad's on five days off they'll go. They'll go to [several coastal cities mentioned] or somewhere and you won't see the kids for five days or if that happens to be Monday to Friday you won't see them. They're gone. |
| Interviewer: | So that happens a lot? |
| Teacher: | Yeah. |

I have observed similar behaviour in a other mining towns in Central Queensland. It is also pertinent to note that this teacher had spent her early childhood nearby, but had completed her schooling in the same coastal city to which she retreated every weekend.

**Identity and Community**

Identity is very much a social phenomenon and is therefore bound up with the people, the community, in which a person feels comfortable and "at home" with; but as Stevenson (1998) suggests, it also tends to be associated with a physical place. Such physical places are associated with the communities which are seen as occupying those places, such as the neighbourhood where someone spent their childhood.

Applying these ideas to beginning teachers, we can see several aspects of identity:

- personal and social identity (who I am as a person within a family/cultural group, focusing particularly upon the immediate family group and the place(s) where I grew up);
- professional identity (who I am as a teacher, focusing particularly on the preservice community and university as well as the current school placement); and
- desired future social and professional identity (who I aspire to be).

The teacher quoted above had a clear personal and social identity embedded in the coastal city where she spent her weekends, based mainly on it being her teenage experience. From her discussion, it was apparent that she saw herself more as a physical education teacher than a general primary teacher, and that her future aspirations were not centred around the mining town.

I would postulate that, where there is a mismatch between any of these three aspects of identity and the teacher's perception of the local community, the teacher will feel isolated, and will interpret many of his/her experiences in that community in terms of isolation. From both the literature (e.g. Boylan & McSwan, 1998) and my own research, a major perception of beginning teachers in rural areas focuses on this idea of isolation. In fact, unless a beginning teacher happened to be appointed to his/her home town, isolation of some sort would tend to be a consideration. Consequently, those who identify in some way with the local community, perhaps because it is their home town, or because they marry into the

community, tend to stay and see benefits in living there. Those who do not identify with the local community see rural placement as isolation.

**Isolation**

Inverarity (1984) identified several categories of isolation for rural teachers:

- Physical, including geographic and climatic conditions;
- Interpersonal, focusing on the proximity of family and friends;
- Cultural, including community expectations and values, cultural differences, and access to drama, crafts, art and museums;
- Intellectual, concerned with the professional development, poor teacher education preparation, and poor school leadership; and
- Personal, including a lack of contact with people with similar interests and non-work pursuits.

I think there are other elements to these. For instance, the intellectual category is multilayered, with professional isolation in terms of teacher to teacher, school to school, and access to professional support and amenities. I would suggest that teachers in urban schools could well experience similar feelings about some of these categories. However, while many of these exist in urban schools, there is a particular heightened sense for rural teachers. That is, it is their perception of isolation which is heightened. For instance, a teacher in a small rural school commented on the difficulty in obtaining resources for teaching ideas in science. She was desperate enough to travel the necessary half hour into the nearest regional centre where there was a library of resources, but saw this a difficulty in teaching science resulting from her isolation. Yet the experience of many urban teachers would be to have to drive for at least half an hour to a resource centre; an occurrence which they would think little of. It seems to be the **perception** of isolation that enhances the feeling of being isolated.

Another teacher I visited was located in a small town about an hour's drive from a major coastal city. Her sense of isolation was extreme, because her perceived isolation included all five of Inverarity's categories. The hour's drive was too far for her to commute (though some colleagues did), her family and friends lived in another city, she felt she did not fit into the local community's interests and cultural pursuits, she relished the professional

contact which my visit afforded her as a major event, and she found little to do on the weekends.

This notion of people's perceptions of possible benefits or deficiencies associated with isolation has been reported elsewhere. For instance, both Duncum and Cassidy (1993) and Mercer (1997) noted that many cultural activities are closely associated with rural communities, but there is a common perception that rural residents are culturally deprived. Only the very remote might genuinely have a case for having little access to cultural activity. It is possible that engagement in cultural activities by many rural residents may be greater than that by urban residents (Mercer, 1997), though its nature may be different. That is, the cultural activities tend to centre around local people and activities, while many city activities centre around visiting and/or notable performers/displays.

I would suggest that similar perceptions exist regarding aspects of teachers' perceived isolation. For instance, Inverarity (1984) suggested professional isolation as a concern for rural teachers. Yet in my discussions with a number of beginning rural teachers, many had very meaningful professional development sessions with colleagues with whom they had developed a form of mentor-relationship. These relationships became a critical life-line for the beginning teachers in their early career development. I have found that rural teachers tend to think that they receive little or no professional development opportunities, usually with reference to professional development opportunities centred around visits by specialists. While this may be true, it would also be true that most urban teachers would not be able to attend many sessions run by visiting specialists - most of their professional development would also occur with colleagues.

In this paper, I have suggested that a key understanding of rurality with respect to beginning teaching can be located in the teacher's identity and the community (and place) associated with that identity. If the teaching situation provides a mismatch with an aspect of the teacher's identity, then a sense of isolation is felt. Although the isolation may be real in a geographic sense, the perception of isolation arising from identity mismatch enhances the feeling of isolation and an urge to move to a place where there is a closer match with his/her identity.

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